



STOICISM AND JUDAISM: HOW CLOSE ARE THEY?

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Biblical Judaism—arguably the world’s oldest monotheistic religion—preceded the development of Stoicism by well over a thousand years. However, rabbinic or Talmudic Judaism (ca. 70-500 CE) was roughly contemporaneous with the life of Marcus Aurelius (121 -180 CE). Indeed, legend has it that the compiler of the Talmud, Rabbi Yehuda ha Nasi (ca. 135—220 CE) was a friend of one of the Antonine emperors — either Antonius Pius or Marcus himself.

In comparing and contrasting Talmudic Judaism with Stoicism, we can analyze two quite different frames of reference: (1) metaphysics and theology; and (2) ethics, psychology, and character.

Metaphysics and theology

To oversimplify considerably, Biblical Judaism is grounded in the belief in one omniscient, omnipotent God, who is both transcendent and immanent; that is, both outside of space, time, and the physical universe, yet pervasively present in the physical universe. The relationship of God to Man in Judaism is covenantal, prescriptive, and personal. God commands us to follow specified rules and laws; violation leads to punishment and alienation from God. The God of the Hebrew Bible speaks personally to mankind through prophets such as Moses; and mankind often “talks back” to God--sometimes quite argumentatively!

In contrast, the somewhat ill-defined Supreme Being of the Stoics is an impersonal entity that is imminent in the physical world, but not

transcendent. The relationship between mankind and the Stoic Supreme Being is non-covenantal and non-prescriptive. Thus, while this Being, in some sense, “wills that we should obey moral principles,” it does not promulgate specific commandments or laws, such as “Keep the sabbath.” Moreover, there are no Stoic “prophets” to convey any explicit wishes of this Supreme Being.

Ethics, Psychology, and Character

Judaism and Stoicism have quite similar concepts of what might be called “human flourishing” (eudaimonia). In simplest terms, this comes down to how we behave toward one another; and how we can refine our thinking, emotions, and character. We can summarize these Judeo-Stoic similarities by examining four main areas:

- **Tact, empathy, and compassion:** Both Judaism and Stoicism emphasize our common humanity, and the obligation to respect all persons. Thus, Rabbi Hillel the Elder taught, “Do not do to others what is hateful to you” (a version of the “Golden Rule”); while Marcus Aurelius taught that,

...man’s proper work is kindness to his fellow man. - Meditations, 8.26.

- **Anger, rage, and revenge:** Both the rabbis of the Talmud and the Stoic sages viewed anger very harshly. The Talmud compares anger to idolatry (i.e., one worships oneself); and Marcus taught that,

Our rage and lamentations do us more harm

than whatever caused our anger and grief in the first place. - Meditations, 11.18

- **Worry, sorrow and depression:** The rabbis saw excessive worry as a kind of cognitive error, correctable by rational thinking. Thus, Maimonides held that “...It is the duty of man to subordinate all the faculties of his soul to his reason.” Similarly, Marcus taught that,

...our perturbations come only from the opinion which is within.... - Meditations 8.3

- **Joyfulness, gratitude and pleasure:** Both rabbinic and Stoic ethics teach us to limit our desires and appreciate what we have. Thus, the Talmud asks, “Who is rich?” and answers, “He who rejoices in his portion.”; and Seneca teaches that,

It is in no man’s power to have whatever he wants; but he has it in his power not to wish for what he hasn’t got... - Letters from a Stoic. [Epistulae Morales ad Lucilium] Letter 122

Conclusion

The rich spiritual and philosophical traditions of Judaism and Stoicism begin with quite different conceptions of the universe and of God; yet both exhort us to respect the common bond of humanity; to avoid anger; to examine the cognitive judgments that underlie worry; and to cultivate gratitude for the blessings bestowed upon us.

Ron Pies MD, psychiatrist and educator, compares Stoic thought with Buddhism and Judaism (juBuSto), and finds parallels. He is the Author of [Three Petalled Rose](#).